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TAGS: PGOV KISL KPAL LE IR JO  
SUBJECT: IRAN AND SHI'ISM - JORDANIANS' VIEWS

REF: A. AMMAN 7626  
    1B. AMMAN 6781  
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    1D. AMMAN 6335  
    1E. AMMAN 7420

Classified By: Ambassador David Hale for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: GOJ establishment and popular views of Iran now diverge starkly, in part as a result of this summer's fighting between Israel and Hizballah. Many ordinary Jordanians have come to admire Iran and its partners in the region for "confronting" Israel. Many of these same Jordanians compare the Muslim Brotherhood unfavorably with Hizballah. The GOJ will continue to support efforts to counter Iran in the region and views diplomatic initiatives on the Israeli-Palestinian front as an important dimension to blunting Iranian ability to rally support on emotional regional issues. End summary.

Establishment Sees Iran as Strategic Threat . . .

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12. (C) The GOJ and Jordanians close to government share USG concerns over Iran's collaboration with Hizballah, Syria and extremist/terrorist Palestinian factions, and its nuclear ambitions. The GOJ is especially concerned about what it perceives as the emergence of a Shia-dominated political order in neighboring Iraq, with Iran playing the leading role.

13. (C) Consequently, the GOJ welcomes American and international efforts to pressure Iran. King Abdullah has briefed recent congressional visitors on his efforts to marshal moderate Arab cooperation against Iran (ref A). A viable Israeli-Palestinian peace process is, in the King's view, essential in order to strengthen moderate Arabs' ability to reverse Iranian inroads, which in part stem from the perception that Iran is the Palestinians' most effective champion.

. . . But on the Street, Admiration

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14. (C) As on other regional issues, however, many ordinary Jordanians' opinions diverge considerably from those of their leadership. Many if not most Jordanians now welcome Tehran's role in Lebanon, its cooperation with Syria, and its reported support for Palestinian rejectionist groups; attitudes toward Iranian nuclear ambitions are less clear. The prospect of a Shia-dominated Iraq still worries some people outside the elite here, but not enough to counter the unpopularity of U.S. policies. During a discussion with poloff on Iran's nuclear ambitions, the leader of one of Jordan's largest tribes summed up the mood when he said that in the wake of the Hizballah-Israel fighting, "we would welcome Satan himself if he confronted Israel."

Attitudes Toward Shi'ism

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¶15. (C) This is a remarkable change in a country like Jordan where Sunni folk religion has traditionally viewed Shi'ism as deviant. There are almost no indigenous Shi'a here, though the growing population of displaced Iraqis (ref B) is probably about half Shi'a. In recent months, both the Jordanian security services and some local media viewed as close to them have raised alarms about Jordanians converting to Shi'ism. Even if true, however, the conversions number in the dozens at most. These tales of conversion whether motivated by political enthusiasm or other considerations -- do not seem to have dampened ordinary Jordanians' admiration for Iran or for its support of Hizballah and Palestinian rejectionists.

Resistance is Back . . .

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¶16. (C) The real story here is not about religious conversion, but a conversion in political attitudes. In part because there are not any important Sunni-Shi'a sectarian issues in Jordan, it is easier for the Sunni street in Jordan to admire Hassan Nasrallah and even Iran than it is, say, among non-Shi'a in Lebanon. Sunni-Shi'a sectarian prejudices meant little to most Jordanians when it came to the Israel-Hizballah conflict. That conflict (re-)converted Jordanians into believers in resistance to Israel as a realistic option (ref D.)

. . . and the Muslim Brothers Lose Out

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¶17. (C) An unexpected casualty of the Israel-Hizballah

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conflict and this shift in attitudes toward Iran is Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood. Contacts close to the movement's leadership report that the Brotherhood senses some of its popularity draining away because, in comparison to Hizballah and Iran, the non-violent, gradualist Brotherhood looks weak (ref E).

¶18. (C) Echoing this analysis, PM Bakhit's political advisor Omar An-Nahar told polcouns that in recent months, he sensed that the Brotherhood had been feeling weakened, and was less interested in seeking confrontation with the GOJ. While he welcomed this reduction in tension, he worried that in the longer term, the legal Islamic movement in Jordan was losing ground to admirers of Iranian and Hizballah-style resistance. Although would-be Hizballahis in Jordan have no organization to support, he was still worried that "if the region continues in the direction it is now headed," Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood would no longer be able to absorb and channel discontent as it has for decades.

¶19. (C) Comment: The Jordanian leadership remains eager to encourage and support efforts to counter Iran's gambits in Lebanon, Iraq and among the Palestinians. From their perspective, those efforts should include diplomatic initiatives to deprive Iran of the ability to rally support around emotional issues, such as the Palestinian cause - hence the relief felt here following the President's UNGA address and the Secretary's work in the region.

HALE